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17 Unveiling the layered structures of Youth Work

Ana Nuutinen and Enni Mikkonen

Abstract: This study describes the components and actors of stakeholder and youth interaction with a particular interest in visibilising different structures and power positions among pluriversal spaces and perspectives. The aim is to seek to respond to the following research questions: What are the underlying factors defining youth work and how to perceive complexity of the situations that the youth at different margins live in? The primary data of this case study is based on 20 semistructured thematic and reflective group discussions conducted in 2020–2021 with youth workers from different organisations. The data were analysed with inductive thematic qualitative analysis. Content analysis of the websites of the youth work services guided the observation of complexity. Three analysis perspectives—the bird’s eye, grassroots, rhizome—were outlined from the emerging themes from the interviews. The theory of space syntax brought together these perspectives. A matrix was formed to summarise the findings of the study. It shows how the layers and perspectives, as well as the actors and places, form the plurality of interactions and networks involved in youth work.

Keywords: Youth work, layers, complexity, bird’s eye perspective, frog perspective, rhizome perspective

Introduction

This chapter is based on a case study involving the one-stop ‘Guidance Centre’ (later called the ‘Centre’) for youth that was situated as a part of the youth department in a town in northern Finland and two researchers from the University of Lapland. During this collaboration, the researchers learned about the multilayeredness and complexity of the youth work activities, promoting youth’s well-being and preventing their marginalisation. This complexity inspires us to analyse the different layers of spaces and actors related to youth work.

In this context, layers refer to the *service providers* (in addition to the Centre, for instance, the outreach youth work and rehabilitative work), the public social sector organisations and their *physical spaces* (e.g., street address), *virtual spaces* (e.g., Discord¹ software and social media channels) and *network of actors* (professionals and young people). By looking at the plurality contained in these layers, we aim at repositioning the agendas and actions related to youth work and collaboration with stakeholders therein, hence moving towards a more systemic—rather than individualistic—orientation that seeks to understand the complexities of the circumstances that different youth live in. We argue that understanding plurality within the

layers of youth work can increase justice and fairness in the structures and social circumstances that promote youth's well-being.

We seek to respond to the following research question: *What are the underlying factors defining youth work, and how to systematise and understand the complexity of the situations that these youth at different margins live in?* We do not offer straightforward answers, but we discuss the complexity through analysing the layers, here by defining youth work in our research context. First, observations from the *bird's eye view* aim to identify the whole and its parts, along with the interactions between them. Second, in the *frog*, or *grassroots perspective*, the overall picture will be formed from separately observed subviews 'as you go'. Third, the *rhizome perspective* seeks to identify the structures and/or functions that lie beneath the surface. Methodically, the layer-related observations are brought together by applying space syntax theory (Hillier, 2007) and the concept of the rhizome (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). Research on youth work (e.g., Mertanen, 2020; Hart, 2009) and social work (Sheedy, 2013) will add critical perspectives to these observations.

Layers of plurality in youth policy and work

Youth policy refers to those policies that aim to support the development, inclusion and independence of young people (Mertanen, 2021, 2020). Finnish youth policy has launched projects aimed at guiding and educating young people who reside at the margins. One example of this is the Guidance Centre, where young people aged 15–29 can receive information and support in various life situations on a one-stop basis. The aim is to find a place and sense of belonging in society and build a meaningful life for each young person based on their resources and views (Rauas, 2014).

Youth policy implements many types of practices, yet an exact agreement on the definitions of youth work is lacking (Rauas, 2014). Tensions can be seen, among other things, in the fact that professionals in the field are expected to respond both to the exclusion and control of young people, as well as to their emancipation (Soanjärvi, 2011). There are recognised inconsistencies in youth policy that affect services for young people. In the midst of these services, young persons should be able to act as active and risk-conscious 'consumers' who are free to choose the services that suit their situation the best. At the same time, it is assumed that young people are not able to control themselves sufficiently, which is why they should be guided and supervised for their own well-being (Mertanen, 2021). The approach to youth as consumers of services has also been criticised, for example, in social work research, of being based on a market-oriented, individualistic orientation that fails to see the power structures and cumulative social effects that are creating challenges to young people's lives (Sheedy, 2013).

Attention is also drawn to the fact that professionals' expectations and assumptions about young people can be conflicting. On the one hand, youth are described as life-hungry, innovative, courageous, active and creative actors who, by learning the right knowledge and skills, can move freely in the direction they dream of in the future (Mertanen, 2021, 2020). On the other hand, youth are considered immature, incomplete, impulsive or even dangerous (Mertanen, 2020). Many studies have demonstrated that in popular political and governmental rhetoric, youth are often perceived from the perspective of risk. Youth at the socioeconomic margins are especially

seen as vulnerable to the risks of radicalisation and extremism and, thus, as a potential societal threat that needs to be governed and controlled (Hart, 2009).

In this chapter, we describe the components of stakeholder and youth interaction, here with a particular interest in visibilising different structures and power positions among pluriversal spaces and perspectives. We focus on the perspective of interaction, where each individual has, in principle, the opportunity to be unique but where one is shaped in relation to the sociocultural environments and the groups with which they live. These sociocultural environments can involve obstacles that hinder youth's sense of belonging to society or their communities. The contradictions in perceiving young people as having the potential for risk versus active and resourceful individuals can be reviewed by perceiving youth work from a broad perspective: its goals should not only be defined by professionals or structures, but youth should be viewed as active participants in developing these services. Because youth work is also about preparing for the future, it is partially driven by the unknown skills and abilities that youth will need in the future. According to Mertanen (2020, 2021), however, youth work deals with the present moment, but a clear vision for the future is often missing. During the current situation where rapid changes have taken place, the past cannot provide an accurate guide for the future. Therefore, young people's own real-life experiences are important, impacting their ability to apply their past experiences to shape future ones.

The method and analysis perspectives

The primary data of the chapter is based on 20 semistructured thematic and reflective group discussions conducted in 2020–2021 with youth workers from different organisations. The aim of these discussions was to identify key features of the work of youth workers and to understand the relevant concepts involved. The topics of the discussions started with the use of art and design-based methods in youth work (Barone & Eisner, 2012), leading to reflections on the situations and needs of young people and the services and ways of working with them. This resonates with previous research (Rauas, 2014) arguing that since there is no mutual agreement on the definitions of youth work, the discussions made it possible to clarify local definitions in this case.

Ten experts in youth work provided solid professional knowledge on working with complex social situations and on regional youth work. Discussions explored the possibilities and challenges of art and design-based methods in youth work, as well as the previous experiences of the youth workers with similar activities for young people. The development of art and design-based processes was discontinued due to the COVID-19, and the emphasis of the collaboration with the Centre's staff and stakeholders was shifted to the analysis of youth services and situations from a specific temporal and local perspective. The aim was to gain a broader understanding of society and its structures, specifically those impacting youth's situations, rather than reflecting on the behaviour of individual young people (Brinkmann, 2014).

The data were analysed with thematic qualitative analysis, in which the researchers sought to categorise the themes the youth work experts talked about (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In particular, the discussions were examined in an inductive way, highlighting those themes that outlined the different layers and perspectives of youth work. In addition, content analysis of the websites of the youth work services provided a starting point for perceiving the multilayeredness.

Next, the three analysis perspectives (the bird's eye, grassroots and rhizome) were outlined from the emerging themes in the interviews. These perspectives were sketched to discuss the possibilities and challenges of online and face-to-face methods in creating safe, dialogic cooperation spaces for youth's well-being and emancipation.

The *bird's eye view* refers to looking at an object from above. Its purpose is to find those prospects that might otherwise go unnoticed. From a top-down perspective, the object provides a more comprehensive view of the entire area, situation or process. Thus, it is possible to see how the process works and how its parts lock together in settled or complex social situations. This also provides a unique perspective with which to view the structures—such as actions, institutions, ideologies or their intersections—that define youth's environments and living conditions. However, this perspective may leave out some nuances that the other perspectives reveal.

A *frog perspective* means looking at something from the ground level. This perspective can be equated with the concept of the grassroots level. For example, the grassroots level of an organisation is constructed as low-threshold services that are easily accessible to people who have less power or abilities in their living environments and who, in addition, have limited opportunities to make choices and decisions. The concept of the grassroots level is relative; it can be defined in many different ways in different contexts.

The *rhizome perspective* refers to an organic approach that provides the tools for visualising and describing complex systems and mechanisms (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). The concept comes from botanical terminology, which describes an underground network of plant roots that rise as the vegetation on the surface of the earth. It can be applied as a metaphoric construct in describing and mirroring hidden social/societal structures and their hierarchies. It allows us to view unique perspectives of different parties, for example, in situations where youth work professionals, young people and their relatives encounter each other to seek solutions for promoting the well-being of youth.

Space syntax theory brings together all the perspectives described earlier. Space syntax is a set of techniques used to analyse the relationships between space, spatial relationships and society. It addresses, for example, the spatial setups of buildings and the human operating models in them (Hillier, 2007; Yamu et al., 2021). Within this chapter, it provides the perspectives to outline both the relationships between the various facilities and society involved in Finnish youth work and social and cultural relationships between youth work professionals and young people. In addition, it opens viewpoints to improve practices supporting youth's well-being and/or emancipation in complex situations by comprehending the relationships between the layers and three perspectives (Figure 17.1). As follows, limitations and context-specific nuances of the processes involved in working with youth can be revealed, which is based on a 'mosaic construction' of different knowledges and structures (Reiter, 2018). This involves a framework of difference that can also be used to affirm more democratic services for youth in other societal contexts.

Ethical considerations of the study were based on the principles of art and design-based research that reflects the current situation and context, drawing on the needs and goals of communities (Barone & Eisner, 2012). In order to build trust between the partners, it was important to listen with sensitivity and be open to edit the research activities along the way to respond to certain context and time. The participants were

Table 17.1 Layered structures of youth work.

Layers	Perspectives		
	Bird's eye	Frog/Grassroots	Rhizome
<p><i>Youth service providers</i> (e.g., One-stop Guidance Centre, outreach youth work, rehabilitative work)</p>	<p>Youth work and youth policy governed by the Youth Act (2017)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – experts, service instructors and coordinators – information and advisory services – guidance and counselling – organising resources for activities for youth – administration and networking – confidentiality 	<p>Steered by the municipality</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – collaboration with other professionals – experts, service instructors and coordinators – guidance and counselling – organising shared activities – administration and networking – confidentiality 	<p>Relation to local conditions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – services and facilities – support of civic activities – experts, service instructors and coordinators – guidance and counselling – administration and networking – doing and being together – hanging out, chilling
<p><i>Physical spaces</i> (e.g., street address)</p>	<p>Local map</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – the Centre's location – accessibility during official opening hours – by appointment (especially because of COVID-19) – equal access, no charge 	<p>Changing operating environments</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – mobile youth work: professionals reaching out the youth in their everyday life contexts – 'Puuhapaku'-van: a mobile youth work unit – equal access, no charge 	<p>Young people's leisure environments</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – public places, parks, parking places, streets, shopping centres, events – school yards – homes (own, friend's, foster care) – equal access, no charge
<p><i>Virtual spaces</i> (e.g., Discord software, social media channels)</p>	<p>Official www pages</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – easy access – 24/7 availability – anonymity 	<p>Formal + informal activities in collaboration with youth and youth workers</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – e.g., gaming + communication between youth and youth workers – easy access – 24/7 availability – anonymity 	<p>Informal activities</p> <p>—e.g., gaming + individual communication</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – easy access – 24/7 availability – anonymity
<p><i>Professionals</i> (social workers, psychologists, housing specialists, youth counsellors, etc.)</p>	<p>Guidance, planning, organising and communication by the competent, professional, motivated staff</p>	<p>Youth as co-instructors and experts of their life situations</p>	<p>Youth work done in the 'territory' of young people</p>
<p><i>Young people</i></p>	<p>Satisfied subscriber and user</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – youth as 'consumers' of services – social justice and fairness of the structures 	<p>Youth in their living environments</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – social networks: peers, families, schools, hobbies 	<p>Voluntary activities base on young people's own needs and desires</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – freedom/no requirement to be in contact with professionals

the ones to decide the terms and conditions of the discussions. Ethical principles were also based on the research integrity, protecting the participants' privacy, anonymity and confidentiality, which encouraged them to also provide critical insights.

Results

We now illustrate the results of our analysis (Figure 17.1), which were obtained by applying the idea of space syntax (Hillier, 2007) to explicitly address the layered structures of youth work. It also has features of topoanalysis, which is a sociopsychological perspective on space, focusing on reflections on how the context structures activities or feelings, experiences and meanings that the environment evokes (Castello, 2010). In this context, the characteristics of the spaces related to youth work and its factors were examined, and the different layers of meaning of the spaces were outlined.

The table shows how the layers and perspectives, as well as the actors and places, form the interactions and networks involved in youth work. The system of activities aimed at young people as a whole looks diverse. When looking at the perspectives as vertical pillars, the dynamic difference between them becomes visible. Different layers, their content and ways of working, as well as the life cycle of the goals towards the future, can be clearly identified.

The bird's eye perspective is seemingly the most static and may even seem like a rigid monotonous frame. However, it contains clear principles that support the goals enshrined in the Youth Act (2017): promoting the inclusion and empowerment of young people, as well as their ability and preconditions to function in society. The bird's eye view highlights the services tied to, among other things, the Centre's schedule, the working hours of the youth workers and the rehabilitation agreements signed with the young people. By organising activities in this way, the Centre can both make efficient use of its limited resources and manage additional activities acquired from the outside. The Centre's services are complemented by workshops organised by various educational institutions that are, in principle, socially and economically valuable youth work. The challenge, however, is that there are numerous workshops for young people with similar content, making the range of activities seem confusing and fragmented.

The rhizome perspective gives the most dynamic and diverse picture of youth work. It implements the goals of the Youth Act (2017) but emphasises the young people's unique life contexts and development of youth culture. From this perspective, a variety of encounters with young people and discussions about new and unforeseen issues in their lives emerge. The layers of the rhizome perspective involve flexibility and the ability to 'read young people' who navigate towards the future in the labyrinth of given external expectations and individual intentions.

Between the two pillars described earlier is the frog or grassroots perspective. It combines the operating principles of both producer-oriented and customer-oriented youth work. Drawing from critical social work and youth work research (Sheedy, 2013; Mertanen, 2020), the services are found to be personalised to meet the needs and desires of young people as unique individuals in their specific social environments. The individual young person is also at the Centre in the bird's eye view, but at the grassroots level, the services are implemented physically closer to the youth, for example, by doing mobile youth work on foot or by car. The

rhizome perspective also includes personalisation, but this perspective combines collaboration between professionals and young people, which promotes, for example, young people's quick and easy access to those things that they consider relevant and important.

New ways of achieving the goals of youth work must be constantly developed. One example is the virtual spaces layer in Figure 17.1. Digitalisation has been a part of Finnish youth work since the 1980s (e.g., Verke, 2019). Digital youth work has been done in concrete places, in online environments and by combining these two formats. The COVID-19 epidemic has increased the emphasis on online youth services. In these exceptional circumstances, different virtual spaces have become places to spend time together. However, digital youth work is not just about leisure activities but also about improving services for/with young people and making them more accessible and relevant from the youth's perspective.

All in all, examining the layers and their interrelations offers a way to move beyond designing one-dimensional solutions to view social situations as complex and diverse, in which the universalistic claims need to be redirected towards the pluriversal (Reiter, 2018). Using space syntax theory to understand the interlinkages between spatial relationships and how society defines youth work and the interactions therein, we can seek to understand the pluriversality of hidden spaces, nuances and creativity as sources of promoting youth's well-being. Through the pluriversal understanding, there is more space to embrace the complexity and use creative methods, such as arts and design approaches in developing youth services. Using multilayeredness as a framework can be seen as a counter-act for the market-oriented, individualistic and risk-based view of youth (Hart, 2009). Pluriversal thinking, however, acknowledges that we cannot see everything; the views are always partial and limited (Reiter, 2018). Consequently, the framework makes it possible to view youth work as responding to different, place-bound environments and challenges in which each situation is unique and of equal worth.

Conclusion

As a starting point for this chapter, we considered the definitions of youth work as supporting young people to navigate their lives in complex situations. To clarify the starting points, we discussed three perspectives of youth work—the birds-eye, grass-roots and rhizome perspective—and their layers in our research context. Analysing the layers of youth work can help in defining the underlying factors of youth work and in dealing with the complexity of the situations that youth at different margins live in. It also helps in viewing other's (and one's own) perspectives as a part of the whole. This contributes to understanding pluralistic views as forming the systems in which different perspectives are viewed as equal. In considering the plurality of layers from a critical point of view, the dominant perspectives—such as the needs of the market—are to be adjusted by the ones at the margins, and the youth's needs, wishes and abilities are put at the centre when designing services to support their well-being.

Note

1 Discord (software)—Wikipedia: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Discord_\(software\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Discord_(software))

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